

# **Commuter Transit Subsidy Benefit Program**

## **Frequently Asked Questions and Answers**

Updated October 26, 2004

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***1. Who is eligible to receive the commuter transit subsidy benefit?***

The commuter transit subsidy benefit is for all Federal employees, whether part-time, or temporary as long as the Federal government is paying them. However volunteers are not permitted to participate, nor are temporary employees who are assigned from private temporary services.

***2. How do I apply for the commuter transit subsidy benefit?***

Complete Public Transportation Benefit Program Application (Form AD 1147). Prior to completing this form you must make sure you meet the eligibility requirements.

***3. What are the eligibility requirements for commuter transit subsidy benefit?***

Participants must be a United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) employee who uses mass public transportation (subway, train, bus, ferry, or etc.) or authorized vanpool (IRS Code 26) and who does not receive a free Federal parking benefit (vanpools are exempted from the free Federal parking).

***4. What authority allows commuter transit subsidy benefits to be provided to eligible employees within Department of Agriculture?***

Public Law 102-486, Section 1911, Treatment of Employer Provided transportation Benefits, effective December 31, 1992. Public Law 103-172, Federal employees Clean Air Incentives Act, effective January 1, 1994. Internal Revenue Service Notice 94-3 dated 1994, Qualified Transportation Fringes Under Code 26 USC, Section 132(f). Public law 105-178, Transportation Equity Act of the 21st Century, dated June 9, 1998. Executive order 13150 dated April 21, 2000. 26 Code of Federal Regulations, Part 1, Qualified Transportation Fringe Benefits.

***5. Who administers the distribution of fare media for the Commuter Transit Subsidy Benefit Program?***

The Department of Transportation (DOT). DOT does a quarterly distribution in the National Capital Region (NCR) in order to reduce the USDA administrative costs of having monthly distributing agents onsite. DOT has previously obtained the authorization from the IRS to allow quarterly distribution. In addition, DOT does the monthly and quarterly field distributions; however, there are no DOT distributing agents onsite. The Field distributions are accomplished through mailings via FedEx to Commuter Benefit Coordinators.

***6. Who should I contact when I have a question about the commuter transit subsidy benefit program?***

Your mission area/agency/staff office Commuter Benefit Coordinator. The list of Commuter Benefit Coordinators can be obtained on this website:

<http://www.usda.gov/da/shmd/transitcoord.html>

**7. Should an eligible commuter transit subsidy benefit participant receive \$100.00 each month of the commuter transit subsidy benefit when his/her monthly commuting cost to and from work on mass public transportation or authorized vanpool (IRS Code 26) is only \$50.00?**

**No.** The participant must only receive \$50.00 a month. Where quarterly distribution is performed, this means the participant will receive a quarterly amount of \$150.00. IRS Code 26 stipulates that an eligible commuter transit subsidy benefit participant may only receive a maximum of \$100.00 each month or his/her actual cost, whichever is less.

**8. *When does the transit subsidy become effective?***

Commuter transit subsidy benefits become effective on the date of the employee's signed application. However, field applications received by DOT after the 5th of any month will not receive benefits until the following month.

**9. *Are carpoolers eligible to receive commuter transit subsidy benefits?***

**No**

**10. *Can employees apply for this program at any time?***

Yes, the program is open continuously for new, change, or cancelled applications.

**11. *What is fare media?***

Fare media is the type of ticket or pass you will receive to be used for monthly transit expenses.

**12. *When computing my monthly cost how many working days should I use and can I include other expenses?***

You should use the exact number of days you actually use mass public transportation or authorized vanpool (IRS Code 26). Do NOT include parking fees, gasoline costs, mileage, or etc. on the AD-1147.

**13. *How, when, and where will fare media be distributed to employees?***

In the National Capital Region (NCR) fare media is distributed quarterly, with monthly make-up dates within the quarter and the distribution schedule is available on the following website: <http://www.usda.gov/oo/subsidyschedule.htm>. In the Field, distribution can occur monthly or quarterly based on arrangements made with local mass transit companies and it is done by the procedures set by the local Commuter Benefit Coordinator.

**14. *When do I have to fill out a new form?***

If you have a change of name, address, or monthly commuting cost you must fill out a new AD-1147. If you are leaving the Agency, you must complete a Form AD-1147 and check the space for cancellation. You must return ALL unused or partially unused Metrocheks or Vouchers you have in your possession with your application. Attach them to the form with a paperclip, not a staple, and submit them to the designated Commuter Benefit Coordinator. It is best if they are returned in person and not through the mail system. If

you are new to the Agency, but have been in a Federal commuter transit subsidy benefit program before coming here, you must still fill out a Form AD-1147, and check the space for new employee.

***15. In the NCR, if I am not at work during the quarterly distribution and I miss it, what can I do about it?***

After the quarterly distribution has taken place, you can go to DOT on the Plaza level and pick up your subsidy at their TASC office. Take the subway to L'Enfant Plaza. Exit at the 7th & D Street, S.W exit (DOT exit). Go up the escalator to the Plaza Level. Veer slightly to the right and straight ahead, and go through the glass doors that say Southwest Entrance. The guard will direct you to the TASC office on the entry level. Show the clerk your USDA badge and provide the last 4 digits of your social security number and you will receive the subsidy. Additionally, the Department holds monthly make-up sessions in the rear of the South Building cafeteria.

***16. Can another individual pick-up my fare media for me?***

No, you must pick-up your own fare media.

***17. Do I need to present any identification to pick-up my fare media?***

Yes, you need either your Government ID or driver's license.

***18. Can I be reimbursed for prior months when I am unable to pick-up my fare media during a particular month?***

No. If you miss a month, you may only receive fare media for any remaining months in the quarterly distribution. For example, if the quarterly distribution is for March-April-May and you miss the March distribution dates, you can only receive fare media for April-May during the make-up distribution dates.

***19. What can I do if I am disabled and have some difficulty picking up my subsidy?***

USDA has made arrangements with the TARGET Center on the first floor South Building to have your commuter transit subsidy benefit picked up and distributed directly to you. You just need to contact them at 202-720-0600, identify that you are a disabled user, and follow through on their instructions for obtaining the quarterly commuter transit subsidy benefit.

***20. Am I permitted to transfer my commuter transit subsidy benefit to other family members, such as my husband or children?***

No, transfer of the commuter transit subsidy benefit is not permitted to anyone, whether family member, co-workers, or others. Along the same lines, you may not sell the transit benefit to another person. If you cannot use the subsidy, you should return it to your Commuter Benefit Coordinator. If you need to withdraw from the program, you should fill out Form AD-1147 and note that you are canceling. You can always sign up for the program again.

***21. I am a disabled employee who rides Metro Access. I need tokens to ride Metro Access; can I get tokens from DOT?***

No, actually you obtain your Metrocheks and then take them downtown to Metro Center and get the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA) cashier to exchange the Metrocheks for tokens. You can then use the tokens to pay Metro Access.

***22. When I leave the Agency what do I do about my commuter transit subsidy benefit?***

You must complete Form AD-1147, check cancel, and submit to your designated Commuter Benefit Coordinator, along with ALL partially used and unused fare media within three working days before your effective date of reassignment, transfer, resignation, retirement, etc.

***23. What if I don't have enough fare media to cover what I owe the government in fare media?***

You will need to write a check to the Department of Agriculture for the balance of your fare media or it may be taken from your salary check.

***24. What if I get a job in another agency within USDA can I keep my unused commuter transit subsidy benefit?***

No, you must complete Form AD-1147, check cancel, and submit to your Commuter Benefit Coordinator, along with ALL partially used and unused fare media within three working days before your effective date of reassignment, transfer, etc. When you get to your new agency the Human Resources staff will be able to get you in contact with their Commuter Benefit Coordinator to sign up in your new Agency.

***25. How should I return unused fare media?***

In person is the best option for returning fare media. If this is not practical use a private shipping company such as Federal Express, or United Parcel Service so you will have a receipt and be able to track the delivery of your package. Regular mail is irradiated and Metro will not accept irradiated cards, so if you use the regular mail to return fare cards your Agency may hold you financially liable for your returned cards. Remember that until your Commuter Benefit Coordinator receives your fare media you are financially responsible.

***26. Will I be held financially responsible for returned fare media that is damaged and cannot be returned to the DOT for a refund to the agency?***

This is up to the individual Agency and will depend on the circumstances that caused the damage to the fare media.

***27. Can I use my fare media to travel between the USDA buildings during the day?***

No, fare media is to be used for traveling from your residence to your place of employment and return using mass public transportation or authorized vanpool (IRS Code 26).

***28. If I transfer within the same Agency but go to the field from the NCR or vice versa do I still keep my fare media?***

The fare media used in the NCR is not interchangeable in the field locations and vice versa. You must complete a Form AD-1147, check cancel, attach ALL unused and partially

used fare media to the form and submit to your agency Commuter Benefit Coordinator three working days before your effective date of your transfer.

At the new location, you must complete a Form AD-1147, check new, and submit to your agency Commuter Benefit Coordinator. This is assuming you are still eligible for the commuter transit subsidy benefit.

***29. Can I use my fare media on travel from airport to hotel and vice versa?***

No.

***30. Are fare media replaced if lost or stolen?***

No, unless the agency authorizes to pay a second time for the same fare media.

***31. Can I put all my fare media I receive for the quarter on my Smart Card, to my vanpool driver, or to VRE at one time?***

No, you may only use the fare media for one month at a time. The application you signed when you entered the program stated that: "I certify that in any given month, I will not use the Government provided transit benefit in excess of the statutory limit. If my commuting costs per month on public transportation exceed the monthly statutory limit, then I will continue to use public transportation and will supplement those additional costs with my own funds." By using your fare media at one time you are violating the agreement you signed when you applied for the program.

***32. In the NCR standing in line to receive fare media is cumbersome. Can disbursement be done in a less time consuming way?***

This is a two-part answer.

No, not at this time. DOT and USDA have set the procedure for distribution of fare media. They have worked together to create more distribution points and expand times to reduce wait times and this seems to be working.

However, if your mode of mass public transportation or authorized vanpool (IRS Code 26) accepts the SmarTrip card, then the answer is yes. You may purchase a SmarTrip card for \$5.00, register the card, complete a DOT Smart Benefit Application, and submit to your commuter benefit coordinator for processing in DOT's system. Once processed by DOT, then you can automatically download your monthly commuter transit subsidy benefit onto your SmarTrip card anytime between the first and last day of each month. No more waiting in distribution lines.

***33. My spouse drops me at work but I take mass public transportation home, am I eligible to receive a commuter transit subsidy benefit?***

No. To be eligible for commuter transit subsidy benefit you must use mass public transportation and/or authorized vanpool (defined in IRS Code 26) for your roundtrip daily commute to and from work.

***34. If a person only uses mass transit during bad weather or occasionally is he/she eligible for the program?***

**No.** To be eligible for commuter transit subsidy benefit you must use mass public transportation or authorized vanpool (defined in IRS Code 26) for your roundtrip daily commute to and from work.

**35. What if I have a change in the way I commute or the cost, what do I need to do if anything?**

It is the eligible participant's responsibility to submit an updated Form AD-1147 to your Commuter Benefit Coordinator as soon as possible.

**36. Should an eligible commuter transit subsidy benefit participant receive commuter transit subsidy benefit on day(s) he/she does not commute to and from work utilizing mass public transportation or authorized vanpool (defined in IRS Code 26)?**

**No.** Examples below:

- A participant teleworks 2 days a week at an alternative work site and comes to the official duty station 3 days a week. The participant who teleworks will only be eligible for fare media on the 3 days he/she uses mass public transportation or authorized vanpool (IRS Code 26) to commute to and from work.
- A participant is on a flexible work schedule (5/4/9, 4/10). The participant will only be eligible for fare media on the days he/she uses mass public transportation or authorized vanpool (IRS Code 26) to commute and from work.
- A participant is on a part-time schedule (i.e., 20, 32, etc. hours). The participant will only be eligible for fare media on the days he/she uses mass public transportation or authorized vanpool (IRS Code 26) to commute to and from work.

**37. Should an eligible commuter transit subsidy benefit participant receive a future full quarter of commuter transit subsidy benefits when he/she has fare media remaining from the previous quarter?**

**No.** When an eligible commuter transit subsidy benefit participant has remaining fare media from the previous quarter the participant is to subtract that amount from the next quarter and inform the DOT distributing agent that he/she is to receive a lesser amount. Participant must inform distributing agent the specific amount.

**38. Prior to picking up a future quarter of transit subsidy benefits, should an eligible commuter transit subsidy benefit participant factor in leave, travel, etc. for the future quarter and deduct that amount of fare media from the future quarter.**

**Yes.** For example for a Teleworker who travels to the main office 10 days a month: Assuming the eligible teleworker receives the maximum of \$100.00 each month of fare media for the 10 days he/she commutes to and from work at the main office. The participant is going to take two weeks (10 days) of leave in December. The amount of fare media used for those 10 days is \$100.00. When he/she picks up fare media for October, November, and December, he/she must inform the DOT distributing agent to only give him/her \$200.00 for that quarter.

**39. Some areas receive a cash reimbursement, who determines who gets cash and who gets fare media?**

DOT has entered into agreements with mass transit companies all over the country and anywhere that fare media is not available we are authorized to pay a cash reimbursement to eligible employees. DOT determines who will get cash and who will get fare media.

***40. Can fare media be provided more than 3 months in advance?***

IRS Code 26 typically authorizes a 3-month advance of fare media; however, there is an exception to the 3-month advance of fare media when an annual pass is authorized and issued.

***41. How do I replace a demagnetized Metrochek?***

You can ask a metro station attendant for an envelope to mail the tickets back to Metro for replacements; or, you can take them to Metro Center Sales Office.

***42. Will DOT replace a demagnetized Metrochek for USDA employees?***

No, USDA does not have an agreement with DOT to replace demagnetized metrocheks. There would be an additional charge to the organization to replace them.

***43. Where can I exchange Metrocheks for the Marc train or other fare media?***

Go to the website <http://www.wmata.com> and across the top of the screen select *FARE*; then click on *Metrocheks*; and then click on *Metrochek exchange sites*

***44. Should an eligible commuter transit subsidy benefit participant who receives a reduced fare public transportation rate for disability or senior citizen claim the regular fare media available to other participants?***

No. If a participant is eligible and receives a reduced fare public transportation rate, he/she must use the reduced rate and not the regular rate. For example: A participant utilizing METRO in the NCR who is 65 years of age or older is eligible for a reduced rate. The participant must use the reduced rate to determine the monthly fare media for commuting to and from work utilizing mass public transportation or authorized vanpool (IRS Code 26).

***45. Should an eligible commuter transit subsidy benefit participant who takes multiple modes of mass public transportation or authorized vanpool (IRS Code 26) to commute to and from work obtain a transfer, if available?***

Yes. For example: In the NCR a participant can take Metrorail and transfer to a Metrobus and get a transfer when entering the Metro Station.